
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Glenn Wharton. *The Painted King: Art, Activism, and Authenticity in Hawai'i*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. Pp. 216. ISBN 978-0-8248-3612-2. US\$19.00 paperback.

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ON THE EVENING OF SEPTEMBER 4, 2013, a controversy over public artwork in Honolulu erupted as a long-established mural at the Hawai'i Convention Center was quietly draped with a black cloth. The 10 × 25 foot mixed-media panel was created in 1997 by artist Hans Ladislaus, a non-Native Hawaiian resident, after winning the commission in a state-sponsored competition. Entitled “Forgotten Inheritance,” the largely abstract composition was intended by Ladislaus as “a reminder to all inhabitation [sic] of the Islands to respect and care for the fragile ecosystem and traditions which have been placed in our hands.”¹ Its removal from public view was ordered by the president of the Hawai'i Tourism Authority following complaints by a number of activists then gathered at the Convention Center for the annual Native Hawaiian Conference. They took offence at the mural's generalized depiction of *ivi* (bones) visible in the sand, especially given the current efforts by many of the conference's attendants to battle land development schemes that threaten to unearth ancestral human remains, which are held to embody *mana* (spiritual power). Even though the artist and his critics basically agreed on the need to preserve Hawaiian territories and Native culture, and despite the fact that the mural had been both sanctioned by Native competition judges and traditionally blessed upon installation sixteen years ago, demands

to remove it from view revealed old and new divisions in the larger community surrounding the role of art within heritage preservation efforts. Although quickly resolved to all parties' satisfaction (the mural was unshrouded on September 19), the controversy spurred public discussion in the media about the rights of artists versus the sovereignty of Native Hawaiians (and the role of the state in defending both), about the clash of intentionalities involved in determining the meaning of an artwork, and about the changing historical and political contexts in which such debates are embroiled.²

The mural controversy was unfolding just as I arrived in Hawai'i for a three-month sabbatical and took up reading Glenn Wharton's highly engrossing and insightful book *The Painted King*, a personal account of his participation in a community-based project to decide the fate of a century-old public artwork. Wharton, a professional art conservator and university professor of museum studies, was hired by the Hawaiian state agency that oversees public art to perform long-needed conservation treatment on a statue of *Kamehameha I* standing in a North Kohala community on the Island of Hawai'i, near the historic king's birthplace. Implicit in his assignment, and consistent with the standard practice and ethos of Western conservation, was an assumption that he should try to return, as closely as possible, the sculpture to its "original" condition and state of appearance—that is, to determine historically and then realize in the present Thomas Ridgeway Gould's vision for his artwork at the time of its creation in 1879.

However, upon visiting the North Kohala community and speaking with its various and variegated denizens, Wharton realized that his task was not so straightforward. The community has a very long tradition of painting the sculpture, and members were hesitant to allow a *malihini* (outsider; non-resident) representing the state bureaucracy—much less a haole from the Mainland—to radically alter its appearance by uncovering the original bronze surface. What began as a simple commission for technical work blossomed into a complex, multiyear, community-based art project. While recounting the compelling story of the sculpture's history and recent restoration in great detail, Wharton's book on the larger project raises important questions about the interpretation of artwork and the politics of heritage management within and well beyond Hawai'i. As with the Honolulu mural drama, themes of covering and uncovering—obscuring and revealing—thread through his story.

Although trained as a conservation scientist, Wharton takes a decidedly humanistic and interdisciplinary approach to both his project's methodology and his narrative about it. Chapter Two in particular presents a fascinating art historical reconstruction of the monument's inception, visual prototypes, and construction methods as well as the social conditions of its production and initial reception at the time.³ But Wharton quickly points out the limitations

of archival research for understanding the social history of the statue (8) and, accordingly, the basis for making decisions about its current conservation treatment. The majority of his research process and the book's narrative style rely instead on classic models of first-person ethnography, although the tale is told in a more diaristic than anthropological register. He begins with an "arrival story" (1), highlights his key moments of "initiation" (55), and ends with a "home coming" (164), arguing convincingly that "[t]here was another world of knowledge I would have to open myself to in order to understand the sculpture and its community" (10). As a result, Wharton provides a rich sense of place, cultural insights into local, Native Hawaiian-inflected spiritual beliefs in the mana inherent in or accumulated by the sculpture, and accounts of how traditional protocols for conflict management (*ho'oponopono*) were integrated into the project's decision-making scheme. Along the way, the reader is exposed to important Hawaiian vocabulary (there is a limited but helpful glossary in the back of the book), social categories, and cultural concepts used by project participants to structure their understanding of the statue, their relationship to Kamehameha himself, and their feelings about state intervention in local affairs.

Unlike a typical ethnographer, however, Wharton's training and appointed task encourage a marvelous attention to the materiality of the sculpture itself, which provides a compelling means for interrogating the object and for telling his own story. From detailed examination of the statue's surface, its traces of residue (some from the ritual offering of *lei* and other organic items), and its spots of degradation (in part attributable to "bronze disease"), Wharton gains unique access into its natural and social "biography" (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986): its mode of manufacture in Italy; its damage during a now legendary shipwreck en route to Hawai'i; its exhumation and repair a century ago; its long history of repainting and care by the community (4–6, 109–12, 149). Repeatedly, his focus on the specific material identity of the sculpture provides a basis for exploring potential semiotic interpretations. For instance, its status as the first of multiple casts or replicas bears on people's notions of its relative authenticity, and revealed layers of pigment come to embody as well as symbolize changing representations of race via skin color. The stratiographic levels visible in beautiful photomicrographs of paint chips in cross-section (113) neatly encapsulate the means by which Wharton and his collaborators came to "read" the object for evidence of perpetual mutability and past intentionalities, and as a guide to present attitudes and decisions. (I wish that the press's art director had been imaginative enough to use these mysterious but concrete images on the cover rather than a straightforward photo of the restored sculpture, which spoils the gripping mystery at the heart of the narrative—will the project team decide to continue the

local tradition of painting the figure or will they revert to an “original” gilded bronze treatment, like its companion cast in Honolulu?) One of Wharton’s most original analytical contributions to the burgeoning literature on materiality and object meaning (e.g., Thomas 1991; Myers 2001; Miller 2005; Henare et al. 2007) is his application of the conservation term “inherent vice”—which refers to the innate tendency of some objects and materials toward deterioration—to a larger temporal amenability of certain objects for cultural resignification (121).

Of course, one of the reasons the *Kamehameha* statue proves such a rewarding case study of such processes and approaches is its resistance to essentialization as a multivalent work of art. Early in his book, Wharton forcefully demonstrates that the motivation for, as well as the iconography and ceremonial treatment of, the statue drew deeply from both Native Hawaiian and European traditions, and as such it proves impossible to assimilate it to one cultural regime over the other. Conceived in Hawai‘i by a non-Native politician to commemorate Captain Cook’s “Discovery” of the islands and to bolster economic and political relationships with the embattled Hawaiian monarchy, the statue was designed by a Bostonian and constructed in Europe based in large part on Classical prototypes and then subsequently appropriated by King Kalākaua to mark his coronation and to celebrate the ascent to “civilization” of Native Hawaiians since Kamehameha’s reign. Wharton occasionally describes elements of the sculpture as “hybrid” or “cross-cultural,” but I prefer to think of such objects as intrinsically “intercultural,” because it is only through the dynamic imbrication of players and their cultural values that such objects are even conceivable much less materialized (Jonaitis and Glass 2010). Heated contests over the monument’s appearance, appropriate location, and symbolic meaning began even before it was cast and continue to this day, and Wharton gives the reader privileged insight into these ever-shifting social debates through archival excavation of century-old media reports as well as lengthy interview quotations from oral histories he conducted. Considering the original political conditions of the statue’s inception as well as his professional attention to physical composition and transformation, Wharton’s case study exemplifies Chris Gosden and Chantall Knowles’ (2001) notion of the “colonial reaction” as the production of a wholly new substance through (often violent) chemical means, which they contrast to simple “mixtures” that retain functions and characteristics of their component parts. Wharton mines the multiplex nature of the statue itself as both a semiotic motif and a motivating factor for the current multicultural community charged with deciding its material fate.

The Painted King might have remained a fascinating but limited account of the sculpture and its conservation had not Wharton been perceptive

regarding the status of the object as a focal point for a century of political struggle. Especially because its very ownership is in dispute (6, 12, 98), the statue has been claimed as a symbol and logo of various, often competing political orders (82–86). Although there is certainly a legacy of racial tension dating back to the sugar plantations (which incrementally co-opted Native Hawaiian land and replaced indigenous labor with that of Asian immigrants) and to the American overthrow of the monarchy, the battles for power profiled here seem to play out more in the contest between local populations in North Kohala and the state, federal, and international business and political interests that have long controlled the capital flow in the area and, thus, people's quotidian lives. From the original context for commissioning the statue at a time of expanding American interests amid a crisis of the modern Hawaiian monarchy (16–18), to recent legal disputes over land development and financial compensation that went all the way to the Supreme Court (60, 129), the fate of the Kamehameha sculpture has been repeatedly embroiled in heated debates about what it means to be Hawaiian in the first place. Although depicting the most globally famous Native Hawaiian chief, non-Native members of the North Kohala community have their own strong associations with the statue. In fact, Wharton's book is not so much the story of the "indigenization" of something Euro-American but the localization of an object conceived of and managed from elsewhere (and not just any elsewhere but Honolulu, the seat of historic American annexation and current state bureaucracy).⁴ Although there have been periodic efforts to enhance the statue's ethnographic authenticity (120, 154), the book provides insight into the peculiar power of the category of the "local" in Hawaii (one whole chapter is devoted to it), which is not reducible to ethnic identity and which in the end provides much of the basis for the project's decisions regarding conservation (suffice it to say, the community chooses to continue contrasting their cast aesthetically with the similar one in the state capitol). In some places, I would have appreciated more historical, political, and cultural context for many of these complex positions and tensions, but I recognize that this might have compromised Wharton's topical focus in a book that did not set out to be a regional history any more than an in-depth ethnography.⁵ His narrative economy, while enhancing the book's appeal and accessibility, may also limit its potential—and highly relevant—application to a broader set of literatures and readerships.

Along similar lines, Wharton occasionally nods to but rarely fully engages with a rich theoretical inheritance that might have been more productively mobilized. As I read, I found myself thinking that a book with the same subject matter but a different sensibility might have been subtitled not "Art, Activism, and Authenticity" but "Mediation, Agency, & Performance."

Without invoking the polysemous notion directly, Wharton repeatedly discusses the ways in which the statue has been mediated—that is to say, represented in various other media—as well as its obvious role in mediating social relations between people with different kinds of investment in it. For example, there are wonderful passages about the sculpture’s amenability to appropriation through material transformation (see Parezo 1983; Phillips and Steiner 1999; Thomas 1999), not only by the government and a voracious tourism industry (82–84, 92–96) but also by local shopkeepers and school children, who did a series of multimedia art projects inserting an image of the *Kamehameha* monument into famous works of global art (105–07). Along with the ubiquitous tourist imagery, brief mention of the statue’s frequent presence in local family photographs (90) resonates with current work on photography and the creation of cultural icons—as well as consuming publics—through mechanical reproduction and wide circulation (Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Glass 2009; Tomaselli and Scott 2009; Kemp 2012).⁶

From both a material and social perspective, the question of mediation hinges on demonstrations of agency—on the relative power that people have had to control the meaning and disposition of the statue within larger fields of cultural production and struggle (Bourdieu 1993; Gell 1998; Chua and Elliott 2013). A more thorough engagement with the analytical concept would have allowed Wharton to bring together his numerous insights regarding local debates about the agency of the original artist (and his intentions for the work); the changing state governments that commissioned it and now manage it; the community (many members of which have enjoyed little political agency since the time of the plantations); the statue itself as a “conservation object” that might make its own demands; and even of Kamehameha himself, who is thought by some to act and speak through his painted bronze manifestation.⁷

This brings me to performance as a mode of acting on the world, another recurring theme in the book. Although he only briefly cites a couple of key academic influences (92), Wharton identifies a wealth of instances in which Hawaiians performatively constitute not only the object in question but also their various subjectivities. Drawing more openly on the theoretical literature might have provided the basis for explicitly linking theatrical modes of performance (ranging from ritual offering of traditional objects, chants, and music, to the creation of new hula dances and puppet shows dramatizing Kamehameha’s legacy) with the enacting of discursive routines (from rumor to public debate) that help mobilize personal identities and social configurations within the community. Attention to such activities and modes of expression add nuance and life to Wharton’s account of his project, and they deserve to come to the attention of scholars working in related fields.

These reflections lead me to my final point, which is about the nature of Wharton's collaborative method and his intended audience. Although as an outsider to Pacific Studies I might have liked to see a more explicit engagement with theory and a deeper unpacking of broad historical and cultural contexts, the book that Wharton produced—relatively (some might say blessedly) light on jargon and slim of endnotes for an academic volume—is in narrative alignment with the project and its participants. Though he did not state this outright, I imagine he composed the book with the North Kohala community in mind as a significant target for its readership, a decision entirely commensurate with the spirit of the collaboration it recounts. In its detailed and reflexive attention to the methodology, structure, challenges and realization of the project, *The Painted King* provides an exemplary roadmap for how to engage in responsible, ethical, long-term, community-oriented work with indigenous and other kinds of “local” populations, especially given the necessary patience and willingness to listen upon which such relationships hinge. Here, the book contributes to efforts within museum studies to decolonize the methods of museology—a field, like conservation, which has to produce practical solutions and not only academic theory—in large part by working collaboratively with “source communities” (Peers and Brown 2003; McMullen 2008; Phillips 2012). One of the most gratifying and interesting aspects of the project's success was the way in which the community came to “own” it through their often-fraught and divisive but extensive participation. As in the recent Honolulu mural controversy, an artwork became the embodiment of much larger issues having to do with identity and political control (or lack thereof) and a focal point for public conversations and confrontations. Local attitudes and identifications are not only rehearsed but are emergent in such moments of social and material engagement (see Kramer 2006). Wharton has given us much more than a personal account of his labor to conserve a public sculpture; he has given us a rare and privileged insight into the material means by which one community has long striven to preserve its unique multicultural existence.

NOTES

1. Statement from a blog responding to the recent controversy on the artist's website: <http://www.hansladislaus.com/page/blog/info> (accessed September 25, 2013).

2. For instance, see Susan Essoyen, “Rights clash amid dispute over mural.” *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, September 16, 2013.

3. Although the book is well illustrated with historical and contemporary photographs, I found it odd and at times frustrating that images lacked figure numbers and corresponding

explicit reference in the text. I suppose this may have been an editorial decision to distance the book from standard art historical conventions.

4. Although Wharton does not frame it as such, one of my favorite materializations of this move toward “localization” is the 2001 tile mural produced by a North Kohala Middle School art class that depicts the sunken sculpture after its historic shipwreck off the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic—entirely surrounded by Hawaiian fish, sea turtles, and coral reefs (104).

5. To be fair, Wharton himself repeatedly expresses frustration with the lack of archival material that might have allowed him to provide more context for past decisions and debates (e.g., 42–44).

6. Although he mentions it in passing toward the beginning and end of the book (13, 143, 147), Wharton never really discusses the documentary film (Baker 2002) that was being made throughout the project’s long duration and how its particular form of visual and social mediation both captured and may have affected the community’s engagement and the conservation work itself. For instance, the film focuses more (relatively speaking) than Wharton does on the community art projects that accompanied the restoration work, and the presence of film cameras throughout the whole project may have invested community decisions with an additional weight. The book and the film actually make excellent companion materials for classroom discussion, each complementing and complicating the other in productive ways.

7. Whether or not one attributes Kamehameha’s own spiritual energy and will to the object, Wharton approaches but does not quite articulate the question as to the statue’s own agency in terms that might have productively paraphrased W.J.T. Mitchell’s (2006) question regarding the agency of visual images: “What do pictures want?” Of course, within the anthropological literature on Oceania, there is a robust tradition of attention to the way in which objects carry the agency of their makers or users through both space and time (e.g., Malinowski 1922, Mauss 1950, Munn 1986, Weiner 1992, Tapsell 1997).

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